

Giving up basketball, taking up golf seems to have affected Obama's game

EDWARD ALDEN

I have figured out what's wrong with President Barack Obama. He gave up basketball and started playing more golf. As a man of roughly the president's age who still plays both sports, I have some insights to offer. Basketball demands all of the qualities that make a good leader. Golf undermines them.

Until fairly recently, Obama played basketball at least once a week, with some pretty formidable competitors, including Reggie Love, a former Duke player, and 6-foot-5 Education Secretary Arne Duncan, who played at Harvard. Since giving up the game, however, Obama has turned to golf, playing nearly 50 rounds in 2013.

This is bad. Let me explain why. Every sport instills and rewards certain personality traits. In basketball, the most important are hustle, determination and teamwork, which — believe me — get harder when you get older and

are playing with 20- and 30-some-things. Sure, every now and then I still get a hot hand and drain three or four long shots in a row. But most of the time I don't make those shots. Instead, I have to just work hard, grab rebounds, play tough defense, hustle up the court on fast breaks and make sure I hit my open teammates with passes. In basketball, these things make a difference — a steal or a key offensive rebound can turn the game around. Trying harder matters.

Golf is the opposite. For players of modest abilities (such as the president and myself), effort and determination are worse than useless. Every golfer knows the feeling of hitting a few bad shots and telling himself just to try harder and be more focused. The result? Your shots get worse because you tense up and throw your swing off completely. All manner of chunks, hooks, shanks and other horrors result. Golf requires, instead, a Zen-like acceptance that the results are largely out of your hands. Relax, hit the ball and don't worry

much about where it goes.

Think about that in leadership terms. If you're a basketball player, and you're missing shots and your team is losing badly, do you give up? No, you work harder, sweat the small stuff and grind your opponents down. This is what Obama the basketball player used to do. During the 2012 campaign, for instance, Obama's team steamrolled Mitt Romney with a disciplined message and a reach-the-people and get-out-the-vote effort that the GOP couldn't touch. The president finished that campaign run with a quick Election Day pickup game in Chicago that featured former Chicago Bulls star Scottie Pippen.

If you're a golfer, though, nothing is gained by fighting back. Accepting the outcome with calm resignation, and just trying to relax and hit it down the middle, is likely to produce better results. So we now have Obama the golfer embracing a foreign policy doctrine of "don't do stupid stuff" and acknowledging with a shrug

that people "just think government doesn't seem to be capable of working anymore."

The president reportedly gave up basketball because he was worried about getting hurt. "He didn't want to do the State of the Union speech on crutches or with a broken nose," his friend Alonzo Mourning, the former Georgetown star, told Politico. I understand that; I play every game with a bit of trepidation that I'm one ankle injury away from ending my playing days. A fellow player, an older guy like me, tore up his knee and has been out for months. But like basketball, politics is a blood sport. If you want to play, you risk getting hurt. Otherwise, you should do something else.

So, please, Mr. President. For all of us, quit the links and get back on the court.

Alden is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. This was written for The Washington Post.